

## **Side Trip, Part III**

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Propelled by a poke in the kidneys with a blaster carbine, Corran Horn stumbled into the makeshift cell. He got control of himself fast enough to avoid bumping into his father and turned back quickly, but Jodo Kast swung the wrought-iron gate shut. That effectively sealed the two Horns in a small, dusty grotto that had once been home to a fine collection of wines from throughout the Empire. *At least that's the impression I get from all the broken bottle bits on the floor.*

Corran skewered Kast with the nastiest stare he could muster. "This isn't over between us, Kast."

The bounty hunter regarded Corran placidly, but the trio of Zekka Thyne's henchmen forcing the other man and the Tunroth into a second grotto across the cellar laughed out loud. Their leader, the beefy, red-haired man who had given Corran the shove, sneered at the undercover Corellian Security Force officer. "You're strictly small time, pal. The boss isn't going to give you a crack at this guy. I'll be the one to take care of you."

"Oh?" Corran gave the man a feral grin. "I didn't realize Thyne was into doing favors for the hired help. You're welcome to try me any time."

"He won't get the chance." Kast's voice came low and cold. "I've put up with your prattling and bragging and threats, Corran, and I am not of a mind to let someone else eliminate annoyances from my life." The armored mercenary pointed a finger at the red-headed man. "Touch him and I will consider it a matter of honor to turn you inside out."

The redhead paled. "Yes, sir."

Another of Thyne's Black Sun underlings closed the other gate and secured it. "They're in. Wanna threaten any of *them*, Nidder?"

The redhead frowned. "Suck vacuum, Somms. You think you're so funny, you can think up jokes while you stand guard on these clowns."

Somms' blond brows arched down toward his nose. "They're in here secure; they don't need guarding."

Kast shook his head. "No, not in here, of course not, but outside the room, on the first stair landing. There you can hear commotion from in here or the main floor and be able to respond."

Nidder shoved his blaster carbine into Somms' hands. "You heard him."

Corran smiled. "Just what I expected, Kast. You want someone stationed between you and me."

Kast grabbed the grate's iron bars and shook it once, hard. The metal rattled loudly and, startled, Corran involuntarily took a step back. Nidder, Somms and the third Black Sunner started laughing, but their mirth didn't stop Corran from hearing Kast's reply to his remark.

"I've no fear of you, Corran. I look forward to you getting out of here because with Thyne sending his blaster-boys off to ambush Maranne and Rijj, I'm pretty much assured that I'm all that stands between you and your freedom. You may be good -- you may even be better than I give you credit for being -- but I'm still better."



Corran's left temple throbbed from where Kast had jammed his blaster pistol against it. "Keep thinking that, Kast, and don't be surprised when I prove you wrong."

"Come see me, Corran, when your boasts are not idle." Kast turned and herded the rest of the men from the small room. An old wooden door closed behind him and clicked shut.

Corran stared after him for a moment, then spun on his heel and swore. "Sithspawn! That son of a rancor played me for an idiot." He looked up at his father. "I'm sorry, Dad. I really made a mess of things."

The elder Horn's hazel eyes narrowed. "How do you plot our predicament being your fault?"

"I should have known there was something wrong." Corran scrubbed his hands over his face. "Their ship, the *Hopskip*, is a piece of trash that Crisk wouldn't use to haul dead bodies, much less valuable merchandise. The others had no idea what was in their cargo hold and it turned out to be full of *sleight* boxes."

Hal frowned. "*Sleight* boxes are hardly state-of-the-art for smugglers these days. It's almost as if they wanted to be caught."

"Right, exactly." Corran leaned against a fiberplast wine rack built into the grotto's wall. "Kast told Thyne the boxes are empty, but I found some with junked holo-seals and popped them. One box had spice -- strictly joy-dust grade, but spice nonetheless -- and the other had a fortune in uncut durindfire gems. Even if we figure that one box of gems is it and the other 199 are spice, Crisk can use the gems to buy an army and use the spice to flood the market and kill Black Sun's profits."

Hal Horn turned a wooden wine-box over and sat. "So what you're telling me is that we have non-smugglers bringing in two hundred *sleight* boxes and they have no idea what's in them. You find gems and spice in two and the shipment is headed for Crisk. Crisk himself can't put together that sort of shipment, so he has a backer. Who?"

Corran frowned. "The gems come from Tatooine. Isn't there a Hutt out there working the spice trade?"

"Jappa or Jadda or something like that, yes. He's powerful there, but expanding into Corellia? That's too bold a move." Hal's mouth opened, then he shook his head. He motioned his son aside and looked past Corran toward the other cell. "Haber Trell, how long have you known Jodo Kast?"

The *Hopskip*'s pilot stood and grasped the bars of his prison. "I don't know him. He's along for the ride."

"Yes." Hal leaned back against the wall and laughed lightly. "That's it."

Corran shook his head. "You're saying Kast is behind the shipment going to Crisk? But that makes no sense since he's told Thyne's people where to find the boxes with the spice and gems."

"No, Corran, Kast isn't the mastermind, he's what's being smuggled into Corellia."

Corran's jaw shot open. "It doesn't make any sense."

"No?" Hal gave Corran an appraising glance -- of the sort that in the past had warned Corran that his father thought he was being lazy in his thinking. "What do you make of Kast's last remark?"

Corran thought back. "He was taunting me."

"Agreed, but what did he tell us by taunting you?"

The sigh came up all the way from Corran's toes. "He told us that he was all that stood between us and freedom -- that Thyne's guys are all gone. He told me to come find him when we got free."

Corran slapped his forehead with the heel of his hand. "I should have seen that."

"You did."

"Yeah, but it took you to point it out to me." Corran shook his head and toed the neck of a broken bottle. "There are times when my brain just doesn't work."

"No, Corran, your brain works fine." Hal kept his tone even, but pointed a finger at his son. "You just need to focus your thinking. You're angry because of how Kast tricked you, and I think you were a bit afraid for how I was doing."

"Right on both counts."

"It's understandable, son, and appreciated in the case of your concern for me, but you can't let your emotions and incidental things deflect you."

"I know that, Dad. I really do." He smiled at his father. "I try to follow your example, but you're better at it than I am."

"I have a few years on you, Corran."

"It's more than just the years, Dad." Corran winced. "I never would have read Kast's message right the way you did."

The elder Horn's eyes twinkled. "I have to admit to you, Corran, I cheated this time out."

"What?"

Hal pointed past him. "Up there, on the bars Kast shook, see what that little thing is, will you?"

Corran turned and looked closely at the bars. Where Kast had grasped one in his right hand, Corran saw a small black cylinder about a hand-span in length and about the diameter of a blaster bolt. He freed it from the bar with a tug, leaving an adhesive residue on the wrought-iron, and felt a small button beneath his thumb, near the cylinder's tip.

"Be careful with that, Corran."

The younger man nodded and hit the button. All but invisible in the half-light, a delicate monomolecular blade slid from the cylinder. "I know what it is, and I remember what happened to Lefty Dindo." Corran cut carefully down with the blade and through the lock's bolt. He retracted the stiletto's fragile blade and swung the door open. "Freeing us from this cell is a bit easier than Lefty trying to use one of these to free himself from binders."

Hal Horn paused in the door cell's doorway. "You might want to cut us a couple of the bars to use as weapons. Somms might not be the brightest of Black Sunners, but I think he's going to take some convincing before he lets us out of here."

"Agreed." Extending the blade again, Corran cut a pair of 50 centimeter-long bars from the bottom of the grate and handed one to his father.

Hal swung the club against his left hand with a meaty thwack. "This will work. Now how do we lure Somms in?"

Corran squinted at the room's closed door. "You figure Somms as someone who will raise an alarm immediately, or will wait to report success?"

"After Nidder's giving him the duty? He'll act, then report."

"That's my read, too. The landing was ten steps up and we're far enough away from the office that if we make some noise, no one will notice, I think." Corran smiled. "I'll do the hard work if you want to do the yelling."

"Yelling works for me." Hal Horn smiled. "Be careful."

"Right." Corran walked over to the wooden door and set the length of the blade to a half-centimeter shy of the door's depth, then cut very cautiously. He scored a circle in the center of it. Once he had the circle taken care of, he cut lines heading out from it as if a child drawing a sunburst. Lastly he carved little semicircles around the hinges and the lock.

He closed the blade and handed it to his father in exchange for one of the clubs. "Okay, here goes nothing."

"Wait!"

Corran looked over at Haber Trell. "What do you want?"

"Don't leave us in here. If you're busting out, we want to go, too."

"I don't think so, Trell." The flesh tightened around Corran's eyes. "Even if you're twice the fighter that you are a smuggler, you'll still be in the way."

Hal nodded in agreement, but tossed them the molecular stiletto anyway. "Corran's right, you won't want to come with us. We'll head out and deal with Thyne. Give us a couple of minutes, then go fast. Steal one of Thyne's airspeeders and fly. Head back to your ship and get out of the system."

Trell nodded. "Thanks."

Corran frowned at his father, then pointed at Trell. "And, listen, don't put that cargo back on your ship. You don't want to be shipping spice around."

Trell shivered and Corran took that to be an eloquent answer to his caution.

"Ready, Dad?"

"All set."

Corran smiled and ran backward at the door. He leaped up and hit it smack in the middle with his back. The door exploded into fragments around, spraying large chunks of wood into the narrow corridor outside the makeshift prison. Corran crashed down amid it all, yelping involuntarily instead of letting forth with a great oof as he had planned. *No jagged edges, but the debris sure is lumpy.*

Hal's voice flooded through the dying echoes of the door's crisp crack. "Keep that Tunroth away from me!"

With his eyes nearly shut, Corran saw Somms come flying down the stairs to the landing. The man kept his back to the stone wall as he crept toward the cell, then he brandished the blaster carbine and prepared to rush into the cell. To do that he prepared to pivot on his right foot, fill the doorway, then go in.

As Somms' left foot came around in the pivot move, Corran caught it in his left hand. Letting Somms' momentum pull him up into a sitting position, Corran brought his metal truncheon down on the top of the man's pelvis. Somms started to cry out, more in surprise than pain it seemed, when Hal appeared in the doorway and clipped him with a fist in the head. Somms collapsed to the floor and did not move.



Corran frowned at his father. "Why cut the club if you aren't going to use it?"

"Didn't need it." Hal snaked the blaster carbine from beneath Somms, flicked the selector lever over to stun, and pumped a blue bolt into him. The Black Sunner twitched once, then lay gently still. "I expect he'll still feel the blow you dealt him when he wakes up."

"We can but hope." Corran rolled him over and unfastened his blaster belt. Donning it himself, Corran pulled the blaster from it and checked the power pack. He glanced up at his father. "You going to leave that set on stun?"

"I haven't noticed that killshots fly anymore true than stunbolts."

"True, but there's just so many more forms to fill out when we bring them back alive."

"Don't even joke about that, Corran." His father gave him a reproofing glance that made Corran feel about as big as a hologame piece. "Set it on stun and you won't regret accidentally hitting a friend."

"Yes, sir." Corran flicked the pistol's selector lever to stun and stood up. He waved his father toward the door. "Time to get Thyne. Age before beauty."

"Brains before impudence." Hal tossed a quick salute to Haber Trell and Rathe. "Luck to you, but keep your heads down and get out of here fast. If Thyne doesn't react well to our refusing his hospitality, you don't want to be in the blast radius."

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Arl Nidder matched Jodo Kast's long-legged stride as best he could. The bounty hunter impressed him, but the armor impressed him more. *Now if I had a suit of that Mandalorian armor I'd be pretty tough. I'd be able to get a lot of light-years between me and the rest of the Bromstaad boys. Maybe I'd hire out to do wetwork for some Moff, or maybe even Prince Xizor.*

His ruminations ended abruptly as they reentered Thyne's office. Nidder liked the office because it seemed like a museum to him. He'd never been in a real museum, but he knew they were places where old and valued things were collected. He took it as a mark of pride that Thyne kept him close enough to protect the crime lord's prized possessions.

Surrounded by beauty though he was, Thyne did not look happy. The holoprojector plate built into his desk showed a view of Thyne's fortress and the surrounding valley in translucent green detail. Moving around the area were small orange icons that Nidder had seen in security simulations, but only when they were running worst case scenarios to scare the wits out of new recruits. Nidder's jaw dropped. "Are those really stormtroopers?"

Thyne nodded, then snapped a comlink on. "All personnel report to battle stations. This is not a drill. We have hostile deployment to the north and east. Move it, I want all defenses reported as operational in thirty seconds."

Nidder and Deif started toward the room's partially ajar doors, but Thyne stopped them with a snarl. "Not you two. Not that I don't trust you, Kast."

Kast raised his hands. "But you don't trust me. I'll remind you of this next time we negotiate a price for my services." The long, tall bounty hunter pulled a chair around where he could watch Thyne on the right and the doors at the left, but did so in such a casual way that it took Nidder a moment or two to recognize exactly what he was doing. Kast looked directly at Nidder, then calmly crossed his right leg over his left.

Nidder shifted uncomfortably and got the distinct impression that the only way he'd get a suit of that armor was to be lucky enough to be around when someone else killed Kast and peeled him out of it. Of course, the thought didn't form itself exactly that way in Nidder's brain. He just knew he didn't want that suit of armor, just one like it.

His momentary feeling of inferiority vanished as he realized Kast wasn't as smart as he thought himself to be. If the mercenary had turned his chair around he still could have watched the desk and doors, but also could see the painting of frolicking nudes on the wall. As it was, Nidder could fully appreciate it -- though he was at a loss to explain why the artist had included gardening implements in the painting -- and smiled to let Kast know what he was missing.

The hologram shifted to a schematic of the house, with the corridor outside the door rendered in yellow light that blinked on and off. Thyne hissed furiously. "Someone is in the hall. The Imps have already infiltrated the building." He pointed Nidder and Deif toward the door.

Kast started speaking in a loud voice. "Of course, handling things in a diplomatic manner works best." The bounty hunter pointed toward two spots along the wall where the Bromstaad mercenaries could cover the doorway with a murderous cross fire. "Then again, there are times when one has to be *undiplomatic*."

Nidder marveled at how Kast's voice covered the sound of his approach to the door. He stopped exactly where Kast wanted him to and drew his blaster pistol. He set it to kill and waited, but shot Kast a wink and a nod. When the nod was returned, Nidder even began to imagine that Kast might take him on as an apprentice, or even a partner. *He's seen how good I am. He knows what he'll be getting when we work together.*

The exploding of the lower half of one door interrupted Nidder's fantasy. Through the smoke and spray of fiery debris came the smallest of the prisoners they'd left below. Coming up into a crouch from the somersault that carried him through the hole, the brownhaired man raised a blaster pistol and triggered two shots. The first blue bolt missed, but the second caught Deif in the stomach, wreathing him in azure energy.



Nidder brought his pistol in line with the little man. *He doesn't see me. He doesn't know I'm here. His mistake.* Nidder started to tighten his finger on the trigger when he felt himself moving backward. He felt his shoulders hit the wall, then his head rebounded from it. Through the exploding stars he saw a second bolt flash out from the blaster built into the thigh of the Mandalorian armor.

In the nanosecond it took for the scarlet bolt to sizzle through his chest, Nidder realized Kast had positioned him so carefully and precisely because the bounty hunter wanted to kill him. Nidder did not feel outrage at having been so easily betrayed and slaughtered, nor did he, in his dying moment, grant Kast a modicum of respect for having worked so coolly to slay him.

No, for Arl Nidder, dying as he slid to the floor, there was only one final thought. *Now if I had a set of that armor...*

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Corran saw the red bolts burn by on his left and swung around in that direction as his target flopped to the ground. At the back of the room, Corran saw Thyne running for where a wall panel slid back to reveal a black recess. He started to track the fleeing crime lord, but pulled his pistol back as Kast's head and shoulders eclipsed Thyne. *He's getting away.*

Corran glanced back at the door. "All clear."

Hal stepped through, looked at Nidder's body, then at Kast. "That's another round of drinks on me by way of thanks."

The bounty hunter uncrossed his legs and stood. "Pest control."

Corran pointed at the dark opening in the wall. "Thyne went out through there."

Hal approached it cautiously. "Looks clear."

Corran appropriated the blaster carbine the man he'd shot had been carrying and set it for stun. "Let's go find him."



He turned to Kast. "Come along. We could use your help. There's a bounty on Thyne. We're going to get him, but the bounty can be yours." Corran looked around the room at the garish decorations and horrific art. "It might even be sufficient to buy some real art and offset memories of this place."

"You tempt me very much." Kast shrugged. "However, someone with such inferior taste in art should not be hard to catch. I would join you, but I'm a simple bounty hunter and I still have a job to do."

Despite having no read on Kast, Corran knew he was lying. He raised an eyebrow. "I don't believe you're a simple bounty hunter."

"Nor do I believe you and your father are simple hoodlums looking for underworld employment." Kast crossed to the desk and punched a button on the holographic display unit's control panel. A view of the surrounding area came up and Corran saw small orange icons moving in swarms over the terrain. "These are Imperial stormtroopers. They're likely to make things uncomfortable if you don't get going. You don't want to be caught here."

"Neither do you."

"I won't be."

Corran nodded. "Another time, then."

"Perhaps." The finality in Kast's voice told Corran there never would be a next time, and somehow he didn't find that prospect cause for anything but relief.

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Corran rejoined his father just inside the entrance to Thyne's escape passage. The narrow corridor had been melted through the native stone with a gentle slope downward. Every fifteen meters or so it cut back on itself, forcing the Horns to advance carefully. The brevity of the passages meant any firefight would be at close quarters and extremely deadly.

Corran clutched his blaster carbine in both hands and snuggled it against his right flank. It had been modified slightly after its arrival from the factory by the inclusion of a pinpoint glow rod attached to the left side of the barrel, and more work had been done on it to make it a what was known in street parlance as a *hotshot*. The trigger guard had been cut away, leaving the trigger free and the weapon liable to be fired when the trigger caught on clothing or was otherwise jarred. Using a *hotshot* was supposed to indicate how tough a person was, but it only took one view of the results of an unsafed *hotshot* pistol being tucked into a waistband to convince most folks it was a foolhardy modification.

*Of course, no one is going to tuck a carbine into his pants.* Corran smiled slightly, then nodded as his father signaled him to come forward. Remaining low, Corran came around the corner of the corridor, then dropped to the ground as a red blaster bolt sizzled through the air above him. He shot back twice, but neither blue bolt hit anything but stone. "Corridor widens out into a natural cave. We're probably at the rear of the property."

"Okay, take it slow. Lose the light."

Corran flicked off the pinpoint glow rod and closed his eyes. He waited for a count of ten for his eyes to get adjusted to the darkness, then opened them. Bioluminescent lifeforms -- lichen and the things that ate it -- gave off a purplish glow that allowed Corran to make out shadowed shapes. Some were regular and appeared to be duraplast boxes of varying sizes, while the larger, more menacing ones were curiously hunched and gnarled stone formations. There seemed to be little physical modification of the cave; the floor remained uneven and boxes had been wedged in various places where space allowed. Corran assumed the previous owner had kept the cave in its natural state and Thyne had stored in it precious or vital cargoes that he did not trust to have any place else.

Corran crept forward, remaining low. He reached the first box and in the faint glow made out the stenciled Imperial legend proclaiming it to be full of blaster carbines. He would have opened it, but the scent of spice lingered strongly enough in the immediate area that he knew what it really contained. *Either Thyne is just storing spice in this, or Black Sun has some backdoor Imperial connections that are allowing them to ship this stuff in past Customs. I'll have to ask Loor about that.*

Corran whistled short and sharp, then heard his father close the gap between them. For an older man, and one as big as he was, Hal moved pretty quietly. *I felt his presence before I picked up that slight scuff of his sole against the stone. Oh, Thyne, you don't know who you're messing with.*

A return whistle sent Corran forward. He moved slowly and carefully, wending his way from one dark rock to another. He did his best to avoid those that were glowing because he didn't want to silhouette himself against one. He took great care to make as little noise as possible, and smiled as he hunkered down behind a large black rock.

Corran looked back toward his father and was set to whistle when he heard the scrape of metal on a rock. He glanced up and triggered one shot from the blaster carbine. The azure bolt streaked past Thyne as he leaped down from a large dolmen, then Thyne's right heel caught Corran in the shoulder and spun him to the ground. His blaster carbine bounced away, firing off two random shots. He felt Thyne's left arm tighten around his neck and then he was hauled to his feet as the alien straightened up, his body shielding Thyne from fire.

The muzzle of a blaster pistol ground in under the right corner of Corran's jaw. A glow rod lit up, bathing the right side of Corran's face with light. The muscles on the arm around his neck bulged, constricting his breathing and killing any thoughts of struggling.

Thyne growled loudly, sending angry echoes of his voice throughout the cavern. "Your partner is dead if you don't show yourself in five seconds."

Those five seconds took an eternity to pass for Corran, and he filled it with an unending series of if-onlies. *If only I had tucked the blaster pistol into my waistband when I took the carbine. If only I had the stiletto. If only I'd been more quiet in my advance....* Self-recriminations clogged his mind and fed the despair slowly creeping into his head.

Then his father stood up and the glow rod on his carbine burned to life. Illuminated by its backlight, Hal Horn stood twenty meters away, the carbine held steady in his right hand. He presented

Thyne with a profile-offering him a target other than Corran. The expression on his father's face bore a gravity Corran had not seen since his mother's funeral. Hal's eyes seemed purged of anger and fear, but full of intent.

"It is my duty to inform you, Zekka Thyne, that I am Inspector Hal Horn of the Corellian Security Force and you are under arrest. I have a valid warrant for your apprehension for violations of smuggling laws. Let your hostage go and stop making things more difficult for yourself."

Thyne's chuckle came low and ringing with contempt. "No, this is the way it's going to go. You're going to remove your finger from the trigger and lower your blaster."

"I can't do that."

"You will do that." Thyne tightened his hold on Corran's neck. "My eyesight is good enough even in full darkness here that I can tell if your finger so much as twitches toward pulling the trigger. And my reflexes are good enough that I'll pump three shots through your partner's head before you complete that move. You may get me, but your partner will be dead. Do it, *now!*"

Hal frowned. "Okay, don't do anything rash."

"Don't, Hal! Shoot him...."

Thyne jammed the gun harder into Corran's jaw. "You were stupid enough to join CorSec, let's not be stupid enough to die for it."

Hal's left hand came up. "Okay, I'm doing what you said. I'm pulling my finger off the trigger."





Corran tried to shake his head to tell his father not to comply with Thyne's order. *He has to know that the second he disarms himself Thyne will shoot me and then shoot him. I may already be dead, but no reason for him to die, too.*

Hal Horn's right index finger slowly unhooked itself from the blaster carbine's trigger. As it did so the glow rod's backlight washed all color from the digits. The finger straightened and Corran saw bones pointing at him. *It's over. We'll both be skeletons left here to molder forever.*

Then the blue bolt shot from the carbine's muzzle. The air crackled and Corran's hair stood on end as the bolt sizzled past him and hit Thyne. The blue nimbus resulting from the shot sent a tingle through Corran's body and weakened him enough that he fell to his hands and knees. Behind him Thyne's body hit the ground with a heavy thump accompanied by the light clatter of the blaster pistol dancing off into the darkness.

Hal dropped to one knee beside his son, then pumped another stun round into Thyne. "Are you okay, son?"

Corran sat back on his heels. "I will be." He rubbed at the side of his neck with his right hand. "He gave me a bruise to balance the one Kast gave me. Having blaster bruises on my head and neck is an experience I could have done without."

"Beats having the bolts hit home, as our friend here discovered." Corran looked at Thyne in the light from Hal's carbine. The area around Thyne's right eye had begun to swell indicating where the bolt had hit him. "How did you...?"

Hal smiled. "The little gold diamond in his eye gave me a great target. I just focused on it -- setting aside my concerns for you so I could -- and hit him."

He frowned at his father. "No, not that. You had your finger clear of the trigger and the gun fired anyway. How did you do that? The spice vapor back there give you some sort of telekinetic power or something?"

"Me, move something with the power of my mind?" Hal shook his head and brandished the carbine. "This is a hotshot. At the same time I pulled my index finger off the trigger, I was able to bring my middle finger up and stroke the trigger. Nothing special or unusual, just sneaky."

Despite the smile on his father's face, and the cold logic of his answer, Corran couldn't shake the feeling that his father wasn't telling the entire truth. *He probably doesn't want me to know how chancy his move was, but at least he had the guts to make it I wouldn't have wanted to be in his boots for all the spice in the galaxy.*

Hal handed Corran Thyne's blaster pistol, then hauled Thyne to his feet and tossed him over his shoulder. "I can feel a breeze from ahead. We're almost clear."

Corran retrieved his own blaster carbine and carried it by the pistol-grip in his left hand while using the blaster pistol in his right hand and its glow rod to light their way out. "I see something up ahead. Stars and Selonon out there."

The two CorSec agents got clear of the cavern fairly easily. The mouth of it had been blocked with a lattice of iron bars with a door in it similar to those of the prison they'd escaped earlier. Corran shot the lock open then led the way out into a small grassy clearing.

Hal laid Thyne out on the ground and brought his blaster carbine to hand again. "Check him for a comlink. We can call for transport to come get us."

Corran knelt over the body and began to search it when a vaguely mechanical sounding voice snapped an order at him.

"Drop the weapons, hands in the air." The first of eight stormtroopers emerged like ghosts from the trees surrounding the clearing. Their armor bone-white in the reflected moonlight, they made themselves very easy targets. The fact that each of them brandished a blaster carbine prompted Corran to raise his hands. *I can't imagine any of them has a weapon set on stun.*

Hal lowered his carbine to the ground carefully. "I'm Inspector Hal Horn and this is my partner, Corran Horn. We're with CorSec. We've just apprehended Zekka Thyne."

The leader of the stormtroopers approached Hal. "Looks as if you are trying to help Thyne escape and are lying to me."

Corran frowned. "What a stupid conclusion to draw. I don't know why you've got that big helmet to protect your head because there clearly isn't anything you're putting to good use under it."

The stormtrooper swung his gun to cover Corran. "On your feet, Black Scummer."

Corran glanced at his father as he stood. "I guess we're their prisoners."

The stormtrooper shook his head. "Who said anything about taking prisoners?"

Hal's voice came low and calm, but full of intensity and power. "I think I would want a specific order from a superior about shooting us. I think to operate otherwise would seriously jeopardize your career, and possibly your life."

The stormtrooper reoriented himself toward Hal and Corran thought for a moment he'd have to jump the man to prevent him from shooting Hal. Corran would have gone for him, too, because he'd seen countless bodies that had ended up dead for making remarks that were no where near as confrontational. What held him back was the way the man's movements slowed as he watched Hal. The stormtrooper wasn't reacting to the tone or challenge in the words, he was clearly considering their full import.

*Will wonders never cease?*

A comlink clicked inside the man's helmet and the murmurs of conversation hummed into the night. Corran smiled and shrugged at his father. Hal winked back and allowed himself the start of a grin.

The stormtrooper's head came up. "It'll be a minute or two wait."

Hal nodded, then jerked a thumb back toward the cave mouth. "You'll want to have your squad secure that cavern. It leads back into Thyne's office. Your people can get inside and hit the towers from below because if shooting starts, your people are going to die taking that place."

The stormtrooper thought for a moment, then sent half his squad forward. The remaining trio set themselves up to watch the clearing perimeter while the leader kept his blaster on Corran and his father. The night air had become a bit chilled and the fact that he'd been sweating earlier became readily apparent to Corran. "Mind if I lower my arms? I'm getting cold." The stormtrooper shook his head. "You can get colder."

"Nice night, isn't it?" Corran gave the man a toothy grin and hiked his arms up higher.

A soldier in the olive drab uniform of the Imperial Army broke through the brush, flanked by two more stormtroopers. The eight bar box with rank cylinders on each side worn on his chest proclaimed him to be a Colonel. His dark-eyed gaze flicked between father and son, then lingered on Thyne's body. "Zekka Thyne. You may put your hands down. I take it you must be the CorSec agents."

Hal nodded. "Hal Horn. This is my son, Corran. I have a disc that identifies me in my shoe. It also contains the open warrant CorSec has for searching this place and arresting Thyne. I can dig it out for you, if you wish, to prove who we are."

"I'm Colonel Veers and I believe you are who you say you are. My source indicated you would be coming out somewhere in this vicinity and even suggested we might want to backtrack you." He glanced at the stormtrooper who had threatened to kill them. "Apparently my reasons for dispatching this squad around here were not fully understood."

Hal shrugged. "No one got lit up, so no problem."

Corran pointed to Thyne. "We've gotten the nastiest of them out of there. There aren't many people left in there and, by now, they should all be Thyne's people."

Hal nodded. "You can safely consider it a free-fire zone."

"I'll remember that if they give us a reason to go in." Veers smiled. "You didn't happen to notice any signs of Rebel agents or Rebellion supplies in there by any chance?"

"No, but as a CorSec Inspector, I do believe it is within my discretion to ask for assistance in serving a warrant and apprehending suspects." Hal looked at the hillsides on either side of the valley. "I should check with my liaison officer, but calling back to Crescent City from here would be impossible, so I guess I'm on my own."

Veers shook his head. "Pity."

"Indeed." Hal waved a hand toward the cavern. "Colonel, if you and your squad would care to assist me, I would be most appreciative."

"We always like working closely with local officials." Veers gave Hal a nod and pointed his stormtroopers at the black hole. "You heard him. No waiting for them to shoot first, we're clear to go."

The stormtroopers jogged forward in a clatter of armor. Veers handed Hal a comlink. "Your transit code word is `masterpiece.' At our perimeter just commandeer one of our landspeeders to get your prisoner out of here."

"Thanks." Hal, looking back toward the cave, pointed at a stream of green laser bolts coming from one of the mansion's towers toward the ground. "Looks like your war has started."

"Then we'll get in quickly and end it." Veers gave them a brief salute and ran off with his men.

Corran looked after the Imperial officer. "I thought Imps believed in leading from the rear."

"Not all of them, it seems." Hal grabbed Thyne's hands and hauled the man up onto his back.

"Get the ankles there, will you?"

"Sure." Corran grabbed Thyne's ankles and trailed behind his father. "So, is this the end of Black Sun on Corellia?"

"I doubt it. Two CorSec agents, a handful of smugglers and a bounty hunter who isn't a bounty hunter aren't going to be enough to bring Black Sun down. Even if the Colonel and his people level that place, Prince Xizor still has enough power and the resources to restore it to what it was before, and you have to know there are countless individuals willing to take Thyne's place."

Corran shivered. "Yeah, I'm afraid you're right. How depressing."

"Depressing?" Hal turned and looked back at his son. "It's not depressing. As long as there are Horns to catch criminals, Prince Xizor is welcome to send all he cares to in our direction."

"And you don't find that prospect depressing?" Corran frowned at him. "If it isn't depressing, what is it?"

"I think it's obvious, son." Hal's hearty laugh blotted out the whines of blasters being fired back and forth. "It's job security. It may not be easy work, and it's dangerous quite a bit of the time, but it's work that holds evil at bay and there's nothing better you can devote your life to doing."

Corran nodded and recalled a bit of conversation he'd had with Riij Winward. "And what will we do when the only evil left in the galaxy is the Empire?"

"That's a good question, Corran, a very good question." Weariness seemed to creep into his father's voice. "It's one that each person must answer for himself. I just hope, when the time comes for me to answer it, I'll have the wisdom to choose the right answer and the strength to act upon it."

"Me, too."

"You will, Corran, no doubt about that." Hal gave him a wink and a nod. "When the time comes, you'll see the light and those wallowing in darkness who move to oppose you will regret that decision throughout what little remains of their lives."